

## Book Review

**John Dewey. (2015, Originally published 1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Free Press**

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John Dewey's *Experience and education* has as much to say about pedagogy today as when it was first published in 1938. The slim volume of 96 pages was written in response to critics who claimed Dewey's ideas of experiential education, ones that sought to connect schools to their communities, failed to uphold the rigor of traditional education. For today's service-learning and community engaged scholars, Dewey provides a strong response for experience-based teaching and research that affirms the necessity for students to learn how to interact with diverse interests in order to uphold the democratic possibilities of inclusion, participation, critical thinking and equity (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010).

The 2016 theme for North Carolina Campus Compact's Civic Engagement Institute, "Democratic Education: 100 Years Beyond Dewey" called attention to Dewey's view of education as a tool and outcome of democratic practice. In fact, Dewey's definition of democracy transcended the concern for a certain type of governmental structure. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), he said, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87). Acknowledging then that education offers opportunity for citizenship development, he draws attention to

what students learn in day-to-day experiences, dependent upon communication between people and among partners. Dewey's writings continue to influence generations of scholars who have taken to heart the need to embed education in lived experiences and community practice.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey offers his views more specifically on how teachers ought to use personal experiences in formal instruction by way of eight succinct, easy to read chapters. His writing is relevant to undergraduate students who rightly wonder how service-learning activity is democratic practice and how participating in such experiences is significant for their lives. The book is important as well for graduate students and professors who regard the promise of strong social relationships and the integrity of reciprocal community partnerships as essential for robust curricular design and research programs. That is, for Dewey, as for many educators, what we study and how we use that research is imbued with a moral obligation to contribute to the betterment of our collective fate.

Thus, Dewey begins in Chapter 1 by discounting the need for academics to choose between traditional, book-based instruction or progressive, experiential teaching. Instead, he argues that the best education, no matter its form, is generative in

provoking thought and curiosity. He admits that experiences alone may not be of the “right” kind if they lack genuine integration or end up, even unintentionally, promoting disinterest and worse (Schwartzman, 2010). What Dewey says is needed in the academy are instructional methods that allow students to make meaningful connections between textbook concepts and their own experiences.

In this book, Dewey goes one step further in providing a theory of experience that can lead students to develop a sustained attitude of sensitivity to their surroundings (Chapter 2). By linking disciplinary knowledge to innovative modes of instruction, Dewey says the outcome will be a kind of creative thinking that will compel students to learn even more. In fact, it is this type of instruction, developed by the teacher over years by herself participating in the community, that in turn provides opportunities, sometimes even spontaneous ones, for students to see the relevance of their studies and action in public life (Jovanovic, Congdon, Miller & Richardson, 2015).

For Dewey then, routine (traditional) instruction is not the problem and experiential education (progressive education) is not simply the answer. He wants to resist that either-or thinking in favor of seeing both modes of instruction as resources for encouraging dynamic and fruitful experiences that align with the democratic ideals of freedom, deliberation, care, and responsibility (Chapter 3). Education so considered encourages students to ask questions, develop social bonds, and deepen existing thinking, says Dewey. Even more important for Dewey is that those experiences in turn shape, to some degree, our very communities and the “conditions under which experiences are had” (p. 39). That is, as students

personally experience this or that, the experience itself alters through communication their perception and understanding of the world. By way of concrete example, Dewey explains that the roads, electricity, and transportation modes we have now came about because the experiences of travelers long ago included envisioning alternatives to difficult modes of passage that ultimately led to tangible changes.

Applying Dewey’s theory of experience to community-engaged activity or service-learning courses, we expect a teacher to know well the community and its resources. Then, he can shape the curriculum and service opportunities in light of the students’ disciplinary understanding and past experiences. The teacher in this situation accepts the responsibility to mine all available forms of knowledge to advance learning—from text books, to be sure, but also from involvement (or lack thereof) in the community as well. This is a worthy endeavor, says Dewey, and admittedly a time-consuming one that reaches beyond the goal of mastering of subject matter to cultivating a desire to keep on learning.

Dewey does not eschew the need for expert instruction and even social control in the classroom, despite his then-critics’ claims. He says (Chapter 4) that the teacher ought to retain her position of authority, but minimally so, in the interests of the students, and with justice and fairness at heart, not as an exertion of personal power. In doing so, the teacher has the opportunity to build a shared community of learners, not foster blind obedience to the teacher.

He elaborates on how education can be experienced as freedom rather than dogma by explaining that when students are forced to remain quiet and compliant, they betray their natural

desires to be curious and engaged. He says in Chapter 5,

“Mechanical uniformity of studies and methods creates a kind of uniform immobility...while behind this enforced uniformity individual tendencies operate in irregular and more or less forbidden ways” (p. 62).

In the final three chapters of this short book, Dewey says the purpose of education is to foster the habit of observation, to encourage an understanding of the significance of those observations, and then to make judgments about the significance of those observations. In summary, for Dewey it is not activity in and of itself that is valuable, but rather it is “intelligent activity” that should be pursued whereby teachers provide feedback and encouragement to accelerate education’s good outcomes. Again, it bears repeating that Dewey wants educators to closely consider what a current educational experience can lead to for the long-term. Following that prescription, the subject-matter should be relevant today (analysis) as the teacher engages students in an historical review of how we got to the present (synthesis), and then considers how learning that subject matter can lead to new ideas for the future (critical thinking and reasoning) in a cycle that ushers in a learning-loving society.

Though John Dewey passed away in 1952 at the age of 92, his ideas and ideals live on in his dozens of books and even more lectures, essays, and articles. His commitment to and advocacy for childhood and higher education, women’s suffrage, educator’s rights, humanism, and peace modeled for the academy, then and now, how to be a public intellectual. Dewey saw clearly that academics did not need to, nor should restrict their service to the specialty of their disciplines, but instead their highest calling was to

engage with and speak out for justice wherever and whenever it is needed.

## References

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